CCC Interview - June 2000

Q: How would you describe yourselves personally? When people think of terrorists, they normally think of masked men with grenades and heads full of dogmatic ideas; the word "terrorist" has a negative connotation. Are you comfortable with people calling you "terrorists"?

Being a communist isn't just about agreeing with Marxism or having your Party membership card, it is also a matter of your identity, your "worldview", your morality and everyday attitudes. Being a communist is initially determined by subjective factors, such as a love of life, concern for others, sensitivity to injustice and misery. It is only afterwards, in order to truly satisfy these subjective factors, that one studies the situation objectively, that one establishes the strategic choices to be made and follows through by putting them into practice. We do not believe that it is up to revolutionaries to choose the focus or means of struggle based on their fears or desires. These choices must be made following objective analysis and must be unhesitatingly followed through to the end. The unity between the importance and richness of these initial subjective starting points and the subsequent deliberate and systematic renunciation of all subjectivity is the defining characteristic of communists. Or at least this is the sense in which we personally have described ourselves as communists.

Today the word "terrorist" does have a negative connotation... in fact one could say that this is the only meaning the word has, as it no longer has any definition that makes any sense. Once upon a time the word "terrorism" was used to describe political activity (as well as the actions of the police and armed forces) that intended to attain certain objectives by inspiring terror among the people or the enemy class. Today it is a label used to politically discredit any enemy who resorts to the use of arms. So we were not surprised that the Cells' actions were described as "terrorist" by supporters of the system, even though it was in fact part of a strategy of protracted warfare, and not of terror.

Q: How did you meet and what pushed you to carry out such radical actions while other activists never cross that line? Were your experiences different from other people's when you were considering these ideas? Did it take a long time for you to decide to go underground?

Pierre had led a support group for Red Army Faction (RAF) prisoners since 1976, and Bertrand joined this committee in 1978. Plus we all worked together on different projects (most importantly a theoretical political magazine and prisoner support work), and finally came together to found the Cells in 1983.

What leads communist activists to break the law? Political analysis, that's all. Or to be more exact: it is political analysis that dictates the strategic options that in turn may imply illegality. Illegality is not a choice in and of itself, any more than legality is. The explanation of the Cells' illegal can be found only in the objective of making revolution and in the political-strategic option of protracted revolutionary warfare". By its very nature legality serves the system in place, and revolution cannot be made within its bounds. The question is to know when and how to break with this legality. The experience of the international communist movement shows that armed struggle cannot be separated from any true revolutionary project, no matter what the level of struggle.

Clandestinity is generally a stop-gap measure. The ideal is for the revolutionary to be able

to live aboveground in society while at the same time carrying out his or her illegal tasks in a clandestine manner. Making the activity clandestine, rather than the person. From the second half of the 1970s on, Pierre was able to carry out illegal acts from time to time, but the police began to keep a close watch on him, and so he had to go completely underground in early 1984, a few months before the Cells' first action. Other than the police threat, the extent of illegal work may also require one to go completely underground. This was what led Bertrand to go completely underground in 1982. It is not an easy choice to go underground, but as we have said, it is the struggle itself that dictates what revolutionaries must do – it is up to them to meet the challenge. So it is this willingness to do our best to serve the revolutionary objectives that, on an individual and subjective level, brought us onto the terrain of armed struggle.

Q: What did you hope to achieve with your first actions? What were the basic principles of the CCC? Did you have some idea of when you were going to stop carrying out attacks?

As a communist organization, the Cells' goal was to contribute to the organized workers taking power ("the dictatorship of the proletariat"), the establishment of a socialist regime – the only system capable of harmoniously serving the people's interests by making the economy work for man and not the other way around. All of this was in the perspective of bringing about a communist society, a society of progress, justice and fraternity, without classes and without a State.

Marxism-Leninism formed ideological basis of the Fighting Communist Cells. Marxism-Leninism, meaning:

- the philosophy of "dialectic materialism" (very briefly : the world is nothing but matter in motion and transformation);

- "historical materialism" as a way of understanding history and society (very briefly : the level of men's social consciousness is determined by the type of society in which they live, and its contradictions ; the birth, development and disappearance of different forms of social organization are determined by laws of history that men can use) ;

- Marxist political economy as the means to understand how productive forces behave and develop;

- "scientific socialism" as a both the inherited lessons of and future guide for the workers' revolutionary action, its central reference points being the Paris Commune and the political activity of Marx and Engels (defining the "dictatorship of the proletariat" as the historic objective, founding the First International, etc.); the experience of the Soviet Revolution and the political activity of Lenin (building a Bolshevik-style party, the first Socialist State, etc.); the experience of the Chinese Revolution and the political activity of Mao Tse-Tung (the strategy of "protracted warfare", the "cultural revolution" to prevent the development a parasitical bourgeoisie within the Socialist State, etc.).

The establishment of a regime that suits the workers historic interests requires a victory over the bourgeoisie (the owners of social wealth who make all of society function for their

exclusive profit) and over its instruments of power (the State, government and media) and of defense (courts, police and armed forces). This victory can only come about following mass, conscious and organized violent revolutionary activity. So the Cells' activity had two objectives: to sow the seeds of a violent struggle for power within the class struggle in Belgium, and to create an embryonic revolutionary Party such as is needed to organize the conscious workers and guide the struggle.

Our strategy was that of "protracted revolutionary warfare" which, to once again summarize briefly, consists of three stages:

- armed propaganda (the stage that applies to the Cells) where actions are intended to show those workers who are already mobilized in defense of their interests and sickened by the powerlessness of reformism, that revolutionary struggle is just, necessary and possible;

- "harassment", whereby those revolutionary forces born during the first phase, including the proletarian vanguard, are developed and toughened through struggle, so that the masses come to see them as a real political alternative;

- "encirclement" where these forces spread their influence throughout society, creating a real counter-power, isolating the bourgeoisie and its mercenaries the police, politicians and media. The triumph of this strategy comes with seizure of power by mass insurrection.

Q: Did you ever feel that any of your actions went too far? Were there disagreements within your group in this regard?

The Cells were founded around a clearly defined project. They were able to avoid the uncertainties and changes of heart that occur in initiatives that occur spontaneously and empirically within the struggle. Putting the initial project to the test brought some lessons, and thus provoked some discussions, but the general orientation was questioned less and less as it proved its worth through experience: armed propaganda delivered the goods!

If your question refers to the drama surrounding the action of May 1, 1985 against the Belgian Employers' Federation, we must say that this did provoke an investigation and self-criticism within the organization (which was made public at the time). But this self-criticism did not entail any questions regarding the principle of the action, its timing or its objective, but rather the concrete planning of the attack (the fact that we "depended" in part on the police to evacuate the alley).

The most serious debate took place during the third action campaign (in late 1985), as the organization noted a lack of balance between its practice of armed propaganda and the work carried out to valorize the fruits of this propaganda. In short, the Cells spent too much energy carrying out actions and didn't pay enough attention to setting down roots, developing, recruiting, training, and so on. The police onslaught came before the organization was through criticizing its militaristic deviation – a deviation that is largely to blame for the devastating effects of the onslaught.

Q: The CCC is often criticized for having a hierarchical structure, with Pierre Carette being the group's uncontested leader. What do you think makes people think such things? Is it because

Carette is the oldest member of the group and was often the one to take the initiative? Did the group ever go through any crises as a result of hierarchical situations?

History shows that the structured, centralized and disciplined organization of the revolutionary forces is a key element for revolutionary success. We cannot expect to be able to seize power, and even less to build a new society, through the anarchic activity of a myriad of isolated and independent initiatives. A Leninist type of Party is necessary.

On an internal level, the Leninist party works according to "democratic centralism". Everyone participates with complete freedom in the elaboration of the political line, which is approved by a majority at the general congress. Once adopted, all members, including those who had opposed it during the debate, must now defend it without hesitation. In this way democratic centralism guarantees all the richness of political debate and the ideal efficiency of the revolutionary party as a real war machine.

The small size of the Cells meant that a conventional application of democratic centralism was not yet necessary (with regular congresses, alternative resolutions, etc.), but the organization was already working in this spirit. Anyone pretending to be the "uncontested leader" would have been kicked out of the group. Decisions were made following debate, and generally everyone was in agreement, but when this unanimity was impossible, then decisions were made by a majority against a minority. It would sometimes happen that Pierre was in the minority, and this never caused any problems.

The problems occur when we reject this way of doing things, and this can lead to crises that serve the enemy. For example, our prisoners' collective worked efficiently for years, and the enemy could not succeed against it until Didier Chevolet rejected the principles of democratic centralism and, refusing to accept the decisions of the majority against the minority, decided to develop his own individual perspective at the expense of our collective orientation, that is to say at the expense of our common interests.

Q: What do you think of the Belgian prison system?

In fifteen years we have seen enough from the inside to fill pages upon pages about the misery, hopelessness, exploitation, injustice, etc. that dominate the penal institutions. Yet in the final analysis, prison is simply the logical extension of a particular form of justice, of a particular legal system.

These justice and legal systems are nothing but the tools of the bourgeoisie, weapons intended to ensure its control of society. They are used to manage and defend a system based on exploitation, oppression, theft and murder organized on an international scale. This society has entered its historic crisis, its contradictions can only deepen, and the bourgeoisie has no alternative but to intensify repression – even using it preventatively. Behind all of the talk of bringing "justice closer to the citizen" meant to manipulate the social conscience, there is the reality of a cop behind every citizen", a return to "an eye for an eye", the abolition of the rights to strike and demonstrate, the institutionalization of a society of informers.

Q: Pascale Vandegeerde, a CCC militant who was imprisoned longer than any other woman in Belgian history (14 years), was conditionally released on February 4, 2000. Her release was based on several conditions, such as not having contact with the "extreme left". Can you tell us

what these conditions are? What do you think of them?

Pascale's release was not based on any kind of unusual conditions, and certainly no thing like having no contact with the "extreme left". The conditions were those that are normally applied in cases of common law: inform the municipal authorities of any change of address, answer the summons of the Justice Minister's follow-up services, etc. – and also to not meet with former prisoners (and so, implicitly, to not meet with us). This last condition is the only one that really poses any problem. To give up freedom of association, which would prevent us from carrying out any kind of political work together on the outside, objectively amounts to a political condition. And so we will not accept it.

For Pascale, in February, this problem had no basis in reality: we are going to be kept in prison, so for the foreseeable future there will be no question of being able to meet with us. She will take a position on this question once we are released.

Q: Didier Chevolet was recently released. He renounced the ideas and methods of the CCC, and asked that his case be dealt with separately and non-politically. How do you feel about his release? The media tried to describe Vandegeerde and Chevolet as the "followers", etc. So the strategy is now to make them look like perfect idiots, while the CCC were described as a gang of monsters at the time of your arrest, when there was a call for the death penalty, etc. Is all of this just added evidence that the Belgian media has a political agenda and is controlled by the forces of capital?

Didier Chevolet was an activist who gave ample proof of his courage and other qualities, both while underground and while in prison, during the hungerstrikes for example. To see an activist of his caliber reduced to begging for his freedom, even paying for it with his comrades' freedom, is infinitely sad. We have the greatest contempt for the miserable little clique of bureaucrats who, year after year, carried out their dirty little schemes to degrade a man who was greater than any of them could ever be. They really should be proud of themselves...

There is nothing new in the logic that divides us into good" and "bad", simply in order to justify repressive policies against the latter. During our trial, the four militants from the Cells were "bad", and the members of the FRAP who recanted were "good". They thought up this joint trial precisely in order to justify an exceptional repression against us by means of clemency towards the others. This gave the impression of balance.

The Belgian press is not "influenced" by the regime, it is a part of the regime. Journalists have their place in the system, an honest salary, social standing. They do not see the system as intrinsically unfair, they feel it suffers from "problems" and imperfections, and that is exactly why they think they are there, to criticize and so on. There is nothing surprising in the fact that even the tiniest little step outside of the bounds of conciliation makes them scream with horror. One only has to think of the media hysteria that followed the smacks received by the curator of Clabecq! It has gotten to the point that some people can't even admit that revolutionary initiatives exist! In their eyes, it must all be a matter of conspiracies or manipulations. And what is true for journalists is also true for the bourgeois humanitarian organizations like the League of Human Rights, Amnesty International, etc.

Q: You have both been in prison for almost fifteen years, including three years of absolute

isolation, a period during which you weren't even recognized as having any human rights. The authorities tried to manipulate you, and they succeeded in separating Didier Chevolet from the other CCC prisoners. To what extent have the authorities been able to come between you?

We have neither more nor less disagreements than we did before. Obviously, the repeated battles we have fought together have reinforced the feeling of camaraderie, but in the final analysis we appreciate each other and get on each other's nerves just as much as before our imprisonment. The authorities' schemes haven't had any effect in that regard. They have only had one practical consequence, that of pushing us to stand together.

Q: Why did you continue to uphold the necessity of armed struggle after you were arrested? You were and are still political prisoners. Why do you make such a choice, given that it is very likely to determine how long you will spend behind bars?

Capitalism does not strike us as being any more acceptable now than it did fifteen years ago. The capitalists don't seem to us to be any less ready to massacre, exploit, starve or humiliate the peoples of the world in order to guarantee their profits. The legal and reformist left and extreme left are still just as powerless against these capitalists. So the necessity of revolutionary struggle seems just as obvious as it ever did – and a revolutionary struggle implies a violent confrontation with those in power. We say this because this is what we think. We know that the system's servants are making us pay for this, but what choice do we have? To quit and thus to help the system's little shits declare that it is pointless to struggle? That wouldn't be true. Not all struggles lead to victory, but all victories are born in struggle.

Q: Regarding social prisoners, you have written, "It is just a drop of water in a desert of misery." Do you still get a lot of reactions from other prisoners, at times positive? Are there any who disagree with you, either out of ignorance or because they have different political ideas?

We get a lot of sympathy from social prisoners who are shocked and disgusted at how we are persecuted. Our resistance to the system earns us some general respect. But this does not translate into political terms, and the advice that we get the most often is "Tell them what they want to hear, what does it matter?" The prisoners get by because they look out for themselves. The vast majority of them come from the lumpen proletariat (or else the children of – often immigrant – proletarians who have never worked themselves). When they arrive in prison they are characterized by individualism, and the prison system does everything to encourage this. This is why participation in a collective protest movement will be dealt with much more harshly than some scam or drug trafficking. The entire penal system works based on the carrot-and-stick mentality, intended to destroy any solidarity between people and encourage prisoners to inform on each other. Visitor's permits, day passes, transfers and jobs are handed out or denied all according to this logic.

As to those rare situations where we have been confronted with political opposition, this has never gone further than a simple verbal exchange regarding these disagreements. In fact, prisoners don't give a shit about politics, and they see us as somewhat likeable Martians...

Q: What do you think of the extreme left today in Belgium? With which group or tendency do

you have the most positive relations? Do you receive many letters from people in Belgium or elsewhere?

When the ÇCC first appeared, the Belgian extreme left in general, and the PTB [Belgian Workers Party] in particular, reacted hysterically by simply denying the Cells' reality. There could not be an initiative like the Cells in Belgium, it must be a manipulation, a conspiracy, the work of agent provocateurs, etc. It would be silly to adopt the same autistic sectarianism (we are the only revolutionaries, everyone else is an imposter) or the same political bankruptcy (their refusal to accept the Cells as a communist organization was a way to avoid a dangerous debate on their own political project and strategy) that were at the root of this hysteria.

In violation of the international communist movement's entire tradition of non-sectarian support of revolutionaries facing bourgeois repression (such as Red Aid in the 1930s), the PTB followed its attacks against our organization with attacks against our prisoners. Any material or word of support for us was always banned from their press, bookstores, celebrations, etc. (people handing out leaflets were attacked and so on). We know how the PTB scream fascist dictatorship" as soon as someone putting up their posters spends a single night at the police station, and this just makes its silence regarding our fifteen years in prison all the more deafening.

The strategy of denial (and the accompanying lies and libel) pursued by the PTB is the logical result of its famous (if unspoken) "strategy of the compass". When we take a look at the PTB's statements, we can see that within a 300km radius of Brussels every instance of armed struggle is a fascist or CIA provocation; between 300 and 500km of Brussels all those engaged in armed struggle (Action Directe, the Red Brigades, etc.) are made up of irresponsible petty bourgeois leftist adventurists who are being manipulated by others; between 1000 and 1500km of Brussels all who engage in armed struggle groups (IRA, DHKP-C) deserve support within the framework of anti-imperialist solidarity, and finally, beyond the 1500km mark those waging armed struggle (the ERP in Mexico, the CPP in Peru) are heroic examples that must be supported without fail and which are the sole representatives of the interests of the people and the working class, all others being losers, traitors and sell-outs.

We are sure that this strategy of the compass can be found elsewhere; in Turkey there are people who say that "the time is not right for armed struggle (not like in Peru)". In Peru you can find people to say that "the situation is not right for armed struggle (not like in Mexico)". And so on and so forth. In short, "anywhere-except-in-our-country-and-in-any-case-not-now", because here what is important is to organize the 42nd barbecue to raise funds for the 14th "Party Headquarters".

The entire Belgian extreme left works like this, although perhaps less hysterically than the PTB. Those who have stood in solidarity with us are both few and far between. This was true even when the repression was at its worst, for example during the hungerstrikes against solitary confinement. In fact, we consider the fact that the institutional extreme left's stupid attitude of excluding us continues without end as proof that the Cells' struggle (and our resistance as prisoners) confronts them with a challenge they cannot meet: that of a truly revolutionary perspective and practice.

Q: How do you explain the fact that most groups engaged in armed struggle have communist ideas? With which contemporary fighting groups do you feel the closest?

The reason for the large number of armed communist organizations is the same as the reason why the Cells were formed: the combination of a desire for radical political and social change and the organizational and strategic options that give revolutionaries the means to enact their politics. One of the essential contributions that Mao Tse-Tung made to scientific socialism was to replace the old strategy of legal and "semi-legal" preparations for the insurrection with the strategy of "protracted warfare". All Marxist-Leninists are eventually faced with the universal value of the principles of "protracted warfare". To give an example of a struggle with which we feel affinity today in Europe, we could mention the Spanish Communist Party - reconstituted (PCE-r) and the First of October Anti-Fascist Resistance Groups (GRAPO) which just a month ago carried out a half a dozen armed actions against businesses using temporary labor.

Q: When do you think you will be free? Will it be easy for you to reintegrate yourselves in society after such a long period behind bars?

It is difficult to say when we will be free. Every month that goes by makes the political and unusual nature of our imprisonment all the more obvious, which is a good thing, but those activist forces that should be denouncing this situation have either chosen to be absent, or else they are very weak. The new "independent" Release Commissions complicate matters somewhat. Before, we were faced with a clique of bureaucrats from the Minister of Justice who made no bones about whose orders they followed. Now, we have these Commissions that make "completely independent" decisions, but which are made up of bureaucrats from this same Ministry... This new situation has a positive side (there is more room in the ranks of the enemy for contradictions and differences of opinion) but also a negative one (the Ministry can hide its interventions behind the Commissions independence").

The question of reintegration does not worry us either in its human or in its material or in its political dimensions. We have been able to keep and to develop friendships and comradely relations despite the efforts made to isolate us. Our friends, parents and supporters have already laid the groundwork as far as most of the practical matters are concerned. As for our immediate political projects, they would involve continuing what we are already doing today in prison: developing unity between the struggles of revolutionary prisoners and those forces that support them.

Q: To conclude, is there anything you would like to talk about that we didn't bring up in this interview?

There would be lots of things to say... Too many for an interview. We want to point out that comrades can write to us to debate with us directly. We should also remind everyone that we have laid out our positions in documents such as the trial statement (where we most importantly were able to develop our observations on law and justice), the debate with Voie Proletarienne (a contradictory debate which we had regarding revolutionary strategy and "protracted warfare" with this French communist organization which considers the situation far too early for armed struggle such as the Cells' engaged in), and the document La Flèche et la Cible [trans : The Arrow and the Target] (where in a large overview we explained the founding principles and the lessons drawn from the Cells' experience, etc.)

Leuven and Lantin Prisons, June 2000